

GCSE Photography

Unit Three— The Crisis in Photography?

There is a (allegedly) Chinese curse; 'May you live in interesting times'. For many people involved in photography, particularly people trying to make a living out of it, these are indeed interesting times!

Photography is going through immense changes and the figures to support these changes are simply staggering. By November 2011, an estimated 100 billion photographs had been shared by social network sites, and by April 2012 Facebook users alone were posting photographs at the rate of 300 million a day!

These are numbers so vast that they are meaningless. We live in a world saturated with images. Through sheer weight of numbers nearly every conceivable photograph has been already been taken, and often taken very well.

At the same time, however, the level of photographic literacy and technical knowledge within the picture taking public continues to fall. Not only do people not need much technical expertise to take reasonable photographs, many are completely unaware that there is anything to learn.

This makes it hard for two distinct groups of photographers. The first is the 'professional' photographer who wants to make an income from taking photographs. In an age where anyone with a few hundred pounds can buy a camera that will produce quality images, the 'professional' is seen as a chancer wanting to make money out of what is essentially a hobby. His (or her) problem is that there will nearly always be someone willing to undercut him. The counter argument often cited by 'professional' photographers is that this undercutting work will be of lower quality so the client ultimately suffers through paying less. And furthermore the person carrying out this work will soon see the folly of working for nothing and will either give up (because who wants to work for nothing) or be recognised as having little talent and will not get further work.

These might be true, but will not help the pro, as there will always be others to take their place.

On the other hand, some of these 'wannabes' may actually be very good indeed, and the client may be getting a real bargain. On yet another hand, it might be the case that talented photographers don't want to charge much (or at all), because for them it's a passionate hobby, not a job.

One of the enduring ironies of this situation is that of an acceleration life-cycle of photographers new to the industry. Many go from complete novices with a shiny new digital

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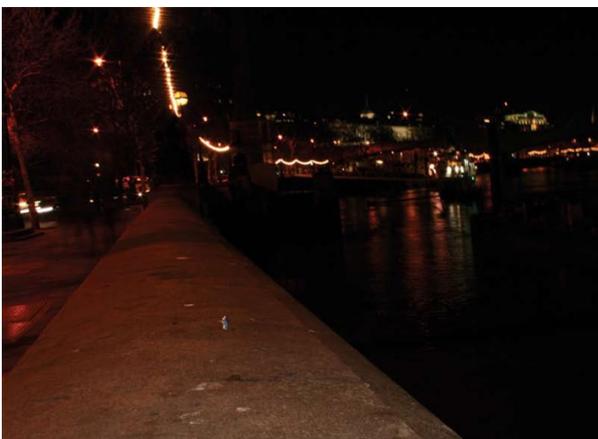
camera to disillusioned, over-priced dilettantes in a matter of a few years or months.

What, a few decades ago could be considered a stable occupation based upon knowledge and skill, has become a race to the bottom, with each advance in camera technology leading inevitably to further competition and undercutting.

The second group of photographers finding themselves living in interesting times are those trying to make original and engaging art from the subject. As the writer and artist, Chris Wiley has stated, 'the possibility of making a photograph than can stake a claim to originality has been radically called into question. Ironically, the moment of greatest plenitude has pushed photography to the point of exhaustion'. (Frieze magazine—Nov/Dec 2011).

Producing more of the same, repeating known themes, simply trying to improve on work already done simply isn't going to have an impact in a world where there are potentially 300 million new photographs produced each day.

The response by conceptual artists has been interesting to say the least. We have already seen the work of Slinkachu, who's little people can give us an insight into the anomie of modern city living. Skinkachu's work focuses on the photographic, rather than on photography. The camera, the photography, is initially merely a tool to record the art of the installation. With his wider, contextual shots, the camera allows the artist to increase the sense of isolation, and sometimes desolation, with which we imbue the figures.



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Photography, then, used to perhaps explore a deeper meaning in our society than to produce technically competent, pretty pictures. Of course Slinkachu is not the only, or first artist to use a camera in this way.

In the early 1990s Gillian Wearing started putting together photography exhibitions that were based around the idea of photographing anonymous strangers in the street who she had asked to hold up a piece of paper with a message on it. Of these "confessional" pieces, Wearing stated,

'I decided that I wanted people to feel protected when they talked about certain things in their life that they wouldn't want the public that knows them to know. I can understand that sort of holding on to things—it's kind of part of British society to hold things in. I always think of Britain as being a place where you're meant to keep your secrets—you should never tell your neighbours or tell anyone. Things are changing now, because the culture's changed and the Internet has brought people out. We have Facebook and Twitter where people tell you small details of their life.'

In her work, 'Signs that Say What You Want Them To Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You To Say' the photographed subjects show candid insights into their lives that reveal a wide variety of complex feelings, often at odds with the superficial facade that people present to the world.



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There is a distinction developing here; between the idea of photography as art in itself, and as art presented in a photographic way. For Slinkachu and Wearing, photography is a mechanism for demonstrating artistic ideas.



This emphasis on the photographic rather than photography has been used for some time by the installation artist, Andy Goldworthy. Using elements of the natural world, rocks, stones, leaves or even ice, Goldworthy creates ephemeral installations in the open and then lets them naturally disintegrate. After time, only the photograph is evidence that the artist had ever been present.

Goldworthy has been quoted as saying (of himself (sic)), "I think it's incredibly brave to be working with flowers and leaves and petals. But I have to: I can't edit the materials I work with. My remit is to work with nature as a whole."

What is striking about the three above artists is that the digital revolutions sweeping across photography is almost irrelevant to their work. The photographic task, in each of these examples is to record the art, and film or digital is equally suitable to the task. While digital cameras might make the task of Slinkachu easier than the film cameras that Goldworthy started his career with, both are incidental to the task of creating the art. The camera then, is just another tool of the artist, not the focus of the artistic intent.

Other artists have embraced the new technological opportunities with great enthusiasm, creating new works that would have been impossible a few years ago.

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Michael Wolf, in 2011, received an Honourable Mention in the World Press Photo Awards for the creation of an image totally dependent on the emerging technologies.



His images are taken from Google's Street View; simply cropped and enlarged screenshots re-photographed on his computer screen. While providing an fascinating and somewhat voyeuristic of the world as seen by Google, does this constitute photography? Wolf argues that as everything has been photographed a 'gazillion' times, and a new approach would avoid the clichés of simply repeating others' work.

"In the beginning what I found amazing was that if one looked enough, one could find almost anything. So many situations - accidents, heart attacks, bicycle crashes, dogs crapping, people giving you the finger - it was just an incredible cross-section of events. It seemed serendipitous but then I just realised it's a matter of odds: you will have everything from a woman birthing a child to a guy dying on the street. And when we walk through the city we're always only in one place and one time but that car is seeing every place in one time."

Another non-photographer, photographer is John Stezaker. Stezaker doesn't take photographs at all, preferring to work with found images with which he creates surrealist collages. Winner of the prestigious Deutscher Börse photography prize in 2012 Stezaker would be the first to admit that he is not a photographer. He argues that he artist who uses photography in his art and, in doing so, 'interrogates the medium' and its role as a so-called documenter of truth, reality and in particular, celebrity culture. Questioning photography as an objective representation of reality is nothing new. What is new here, and very interesting, is the abandoning of new photography itself, relying on the work of previous photographers to create something new.

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In each of the above artist's work, in different ways, the art is about the nature of the photographic - the making of the images, rather than the taking of a photograph. The end result being more important than the process of making it. It's not about photography. The advantage for the artist of digital photography is that much of the physical work of photography has been removed. No longer do photographers (or perhaps more accurately, those using cameras) have to concern themselves with choice of film, have to use darkrooms, or even have to load a camera.

This frees the artist to be more conceptual, and it is perhaps the conceptual artist that is currently more successful, both in terms of being noticed and monetary rewards.

That said, and for all the evident changes, photography continues to be incredibly popular. Festivals, galleries and books on the subject can be found in increasing numbers all over the world. Advances in technology make even self-published books viable and there can be few events that do not have an 'official photographer' (paid, or unpaid), in attendance.

We do indeed live in 'interesting times', but this need not be a curse. Those who complain the most about the plight of the 'professional' photographer unable to make a living are often a small step away from those who they blame for ruining 'their' industry. There are exceptions, of course and for many talented hard-working photographers, times are 'interesting' in the Chinese sense of the word.

To many people, photographers have got it made. They expect to be paid (and paid well) for something that looks like a hobby. Indeed, many amateur photographers are very talented and modern technology has allowed the amateur to achieve technical results that were, not so long ago, impossible without extremely expensive equipment.

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Take, for example, the portrait photographer of thirty years ago. His Hassleblad, medium format camera was accompanied by an expensive flash meter and bulky lighting equipment. Today's modern DSLR's, with wireless off-camera flashguns are a fraction of the cost in real terms and far, far easier to use. That they still might not produce a result technically as good is an irrelevance to the grateful client who only really wants a pretty photograph of their children or pet at a low cost.

Not since Kodak made the Brownie, with it's famous slogan, 'You press the button. We do the rest', has photography changed so much as the past two decades. The emergence of social media sites such as facebook, flickr and instagram have changed the perception of photography in a profound way. Photography has ceased to be the elitist pursuit of 'professionals' or purist hobbyists and has been truly democratised.

Anyone can take a photograph now. That doesn't mean, of course that anyone can take a good photograph. Some things are a lot easier than in the past, but the skills that go into making a great photograph are not purely mastering the controls of the camera. So far in this course we've looked at the 'How' and the 'What', how to operate the camera to give the creative results you want, and the ways photographers have adapted that knowledge to their particular interests.

This Unit looks at the 'Why'; the motivation of photographers to produce their work. For many, the vast majority in fact, the 'Why' is simply the desire to produce good photographers. For others, it's wanting to make money, while for others it's the creation of art. This introduction has concentrated on conceptual artists and their use of the photographic, rather than photography. For these artists there is no crisis in photography. The advances that have led to the undercutting race to the bottom that so many in photography constantly bemoan simply are irrelevant to them—they are on a different trajectory altogether. Neither is there a crisis for the vast majority of photographers, they are playing for the love of the game. If there is a crisis, it's for those who see photography as a means of making money, and they do have problems.

While this Unit address will photography as a business in modern society, it will primarily focus on non-instrumental orientations to photography. In this respect it will look at the growth of social media and reasons suggested for the massive growth and popularity of photography as a means of communication. It will also look further at conceptual artists who use photography (or the photographic) in their work. Interestingly, from a purely commercial aspect, the three most expensive photographs at auction have all been produced by conceptual artists.